From
CONVERSATIONS OF GOETHE
with Eckermann and Soret

TRANSLATED BY JOHN OXENFORD

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"Every *Entelechy** is a piece of eternity, and the few years during which it is bound to the earthly body do not make it old. If this *Entelechy* is of a trivial kind, it will exercise but little sway; the body will predominate, and when this grows old the *Entelechy* will not hold and restrain it. But if the *Entelechy* is of a powerful kind, as is the case with all men of natural genius, then it will, with its animating penetration of the body, not only strengthen and ennoble the organization, but also endeavor with its spiritual superiority to confer the privilege of perpetual youth. Thence it comes that in men of superior endowments, even during their old age, we constantly perceive fresh epochs of singular productiveness; they seem constantly to grow young again for a time, and that is what I call a repeated puberty. Still—youth is youth; and, however powerful an *Entelechy* may prove, it will never become quite master of the corporeal, and it makes a wonderful difference whether it finds in the body an ally or an adversary.

"There was a time when I had to furnish a printed sheet

* If for this Aristotelian word the reader substitutes the popular expression "soul" he will not go far wrong as far as this passage is concerned. J.O.

An Aristotelian *Entelechy* is the condition by which a potentiality becomes an actuality.

every day, and I did it easily. I wrote my *Geschwister [Brother and Sister]* in three days; my *Clavigo,* as you know, in a week. Now it seems I can do nothing of the kind, and still I can by no means complain of want of productiveness even at my advanced age. But whereas in my youth I succeeded daily and under all circumstances, I now succeed only periodically and under favorable conditions. When, ten or twelve years ago, in the happy time after the war of independence, the poems of the *Divan* had me in their power, I often composed two or three in a day; and it was all the same to me whether I was in the open air, in the chariot, or in an inn. Now, I can only work at the second part of my *Faust* during the early part of the day, when I feel refreshed and revived by sleep and have not been perplexed by the trifles of daily life. And after all, what is it I achieve? In the most favorable circumstances, a page of writing: but generally only so much as could be written in the space of a handbreadth, and often, when in an unproductive humor, still less."

"Are there, then, no means," said I, "to call forth a productive mood, or, if it is not powerful enough, of increasing it?"

"No productiveness of the highest kind," said Goethe, "no remarkable discovery, no great thought that bears fruit and has results, is in the power of anyone; such things are above earthly control. Man must consider them as an unexpected gift from above, as pure children of God which he must receive and venerate with joyful thanks. They are akin to the demon, which does with him what it pleases, and to which he unconsciously resigns himself while he believes he is acting from his own impulse. In such cases, man may often be considered an instrument in a higher government of the world—a vessel worthy to contain a divine influence. I say this when I consider how often a single thought has given a different form to whole centuries, and how individual men have imprinted a stamp upon their age which has remained uneffaced and operated beneficially for generations.

"However, there is a productiveness of another kind: one subject to earthly influences, one that man has more

in his power—although here also he finds cause to bow before something divine. In this category I place all that appertains to the execution of a plan, all the links of a chain of thought, the ends of which already shine forth; I also place there all that constitutes the visible body of a work of art.

"Thus, Shakespeare was inspired with the first thought of his *Hamlet* when the spirit of the whole presented itself to his mind as an unexpected impression; and when he surveyed the several situations, characters, and conclusion, in an elevated mood, as a pure gift from above on which he had no immediate influence—although the possibility of such a conception certainly presupposed a mind like his. But the individual scenes, and the dialogue of the characters, he had completely in his power, so that he might produce them daily and hourly and work at them for weeks if he liked. And, indeed, we constantly see in all that he has achieved the same power of production; and in all his plays we never come to a passage of which it could be said, 'This was not written in the proper humor, or with the most perfect faculty.' While we read him, we receive the impression of a man thoroughly strong and healthy in both mind and body.

"Supposing, however, that the bodily constitution of a dramatic poet were not so strong and excellent, and that he were subject to frequent illness and weakness—the productiveness necessary for the daily construction of his scenes would very frequently cease, and would often fail him for days. If now, by alcohol, he tried to force his failing productiveness, the method would certainly answer; but it would be discoverable in all the scenes he had written under such an influence, to their great disadvantage. My counsel is, to force nothing, and rather to trifle and sleep away all unproductive days and hours, than on such days to compose something that will afterwards give no pleasure."

"That," said I, "is what I myself have very often experienced and felt. Still, it appears to me that a person might by natural means heighten his productive mood without exactly forcing it. I have often been unable to

arrive at any right conclusion in complicated circumstances; but if I have drunk a few glasses of wine I have at once seen clearly what was to be done, and have come to a resolution on the spot. The adoption of a resolution is, after all, a species of productiveness; and, if a glass or two of wine will bring about this good effect, such means are surely not to be rejected altogether."

"I will not contradict you," said Goethe, "but what I said before is also correct, by which you see that truth may be compared to a diamond, the rays of which dart not to one side, but to many. Since you know my *Divan* so well, you know also that I myself have said:

When we have drunk
We know what's right;

and therefore that I perfectly agree with you. Productive-making* powers of a very important kind certainly are contained in wine; still, all depends upon time and circumstance, and what is useful to one is prejudicial to another. Productive-making powers are also contained in sleep and repose; but they are also contained in movement. Such powers lie in the water, and particularly in the atmosphere. The fresh air of the open country is our proper element; it is as if the breath of God were there wafted immediately to men, and a divine power exerted its influence. Lord Byron, who daily passed several hours in the open air—now riding on horseback along the seashore; now sailing or rowing in a boat; now bathing in the sea, and exercising his physical powers in swimming—was one of the most productive men who ever lived."

Goethe had seated himself opposite to me. We again dwelt upon Lord Byron, and the many misfortunes that had embittered his later life—until at last a noble will, but an unhappy destiny, drove him into Greece, and entirely destroyed him.

"You will find," continued Goethe, "that in middle age a man frequently experiences a change; and that, while

* "Productivmachende." Probably he meant "production-stimulating."

in his youth everything has favored him, and has prospered with him, all is now completely reversed, and misfortunes and disasters are heaped one upon another.

"But do you know what I think about it? Man must be ruined again! Every extraordinary man has a certain mission to accomplish. If he has fulfilled it, he is no longer needed upon earth in the same form, and Providence uses him for something else. But as everything here below happens in a natural way, the demons keep tripping him up till he falls at last. Thus it was with Napoleon and many others. Mozart died in his thirty-sixth year. Raphael at the same age. Byron only a little older. But all these had perfectly fulfilled their missions; and it was time for them to depart, that other people might still have something to do in a world made to last a long while."